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ABSTRACT

Earlier sociolinguistic studies distinguish between Standard English and Black English with respect to indirect question formation. Standard English typically does not invert the tense-marker "do" in the imbedded question ("Ask John if he played basketball today") while Black English does ("Ask John did he play basketball today"). In fact, the inverted form is common among speakers of Standard English and the noninverted forms are common among the Black English speakers examined in this study: elderly female basilectal speakers in Wilmington, North Carolina. For most speakers, then, "do"--inversion is a variable rule, not a categorical rule. Speakers for whom the rule is categorical would appear to be either in a hypercorrecting stage of the post-creole continuum, or more likely merely immature speakers affected by age-grading. (Author/KS)

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Variation in Some Southern Black Idiolects:

Indirect Question Formation

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November 23, 1975

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One truism in recent sociolinguistic investigation of American dialects is that Standard English on the one hand, and Black English and Southern States English on the other, are distinct with respect to the way that they form indirect questions.[1] Thus where "Standard English" would typically have:

(1a). Ask John if (whether) the mail came yet

(2a). Find out from John whether (if) he played basketball today (or not)

(3a). John wonders whether (if) there is water on the moon

(4a). I don't know if (whether) it is the third floor, or what floor it was

the Nonstandard varieties would have:

(1b). Ask John did the mail come yet

(2b). Find out from John did he play basketball today

(3b). John wonders is there water on the moon

(4b). I don't know is it the third floor or what floor it was.

That is, the Nonstandard variety merely adds the direct question form in the slot where Standard English uses <u>if/whether</u> / the declarative.

In fact, the situation is much more complex than this simple dichotomy suggests. In a previous paper (to appear in <u>American Speech</u>) I have tried to demonstrate that the so-called Nonstandard forms are actually commonplace in the speech (if not the writing) of speakers of Standard American English, and that they are widespread in Anglo-Irish.[2] Even earlier, Gordon and Lakoff (1971) pointed out that such constructions as

(5). I wonder how did he finish the job

are common in certain American (presumably "mainstream") dialects; they, however, appear to be thinking only of a rather narrow case in which (5) is a special, "insistent" form—a request for information rather than a simple statement—

contrasting therefore in meaning with the "normal" form:

(6). I wonder how he finished the job.

In fact--or so I hope my earlier paper has demonstrated--sentences such as (5) (and (1b) - (4b)) can be used non-insistently (as a mere stylistic--though generally colloquial and casual--variation) by "mainstream" speakers. Gordon and Lakoff's examples, in any dialect known to this writer, seem to need direct-question intonation to deliver the intended "insist$_a$nt" meaning, as suggested by the punctuation of the following:

(7). I wonder--how did he finish the job?

(8). I wonder, "How did he finish the job?"

What is even more surprising, however, than the widespread use of the inverted forms in Standard English is the heavy use of the noninverted (i.e., "Standard") forms in otherwise very deviant Black English: that of eight elderly black ladies in Wilmington, North Carolina, who were interviewed by this investigator in August 1974. All of these ladies were sixty-five years of age or older (the actual range was 65-81); none was a highschool graduate, most having stopped their schooling in grades 7, 8, or 9. All were long-time residents of Wilmington; all but one (a farmer) had been domestic workers nearly all their lives. Thus one would expect from such subjects a high conformance to heavy "Black English" patterns of the most basilectal sort. And with respect to many of the well-known Black English features this was so. But with respect to indirect question formation it was not.

Consider first of all their responses to the repetition tests of the sort administered by Labov and others to adolescent black males in northern urban areas.[4] Labov found that, if his subjects were asked to repeat a sentence such as (1a)-(3a), the response was often (for about half of his informants) the Nonstandard variety (1b)—(3b)—from which Labov concluded that the <u>if/whether</u> forms were not really part of the productive competence of "Black English"

at all—the subjects seemed to understand them, but couldn't reproduce them.

My results with respect to repetition tests are, frankly, limited by the fact that several of my subjects were unwilling to undergo the repetition tests. Of the four who did, however, the results show what seems to me to be a significant ability to reproduce the Standard English forms. The subjects were asked to repeat three sentences:

(9). Ask John if the mail came yet

(10). John wonders whether there is water on the moon

(11). Find out from John did he play basketball today.

All four subjects repeated (9) correctly with respect to the portions relevant to this discussion. Two subjects converted (10) to the _if_—form, one repeated it precisely, and only one converted it to the "Black English" form, (3b) _John wonders is there water on the moon_. This is a bit of confirmation of Labov's view that _if_ is preferred to _whether_ (but see below); however, it also shows surprising ability to use the non-inverted forms (seven out of the eight possible responses were correct). Even more surprisingly, while three of the four _did_ correctly repeat the "Black English" form of sentence (11), the fourth reproduced it as (12) _Find out from John whether he played basketball today_--that is, the "Standard" form; this speaker, moreover, was the very one who converted (10) to its "Black English" form! One rather tenuously concludes, then, that the _if_-form , for these speakers, is a viable portion of their productive linguistic competence, and that _whether_, while somewhat less preferred, is also present. The inverted forms, of course, are also found. In short, we appear to be dealing here with a variable rule of the classical sort--just as was found in Standard English in my earlier study--and not a categorical rule, as Labov's study implies.

This suggestion is further borne out by the evidence of the "free conversation" portion of my data. Of the five instances of true indirect questions found, three show the inverted form (13-15) and two show the "Standard"

form (16-17):

(13). Lots of people asked me why didn't I come to the city (C.T.)

(14). You just wonder where has the money gone (A.M.)

(15). They sent him down here from New York to see about our living quarters and how were we living and did we like it (L.W.)

(16) They haven't found out yet why it burned down (L.W.)

(17) Let me know if you're comin' (L.W.)

(The initials in parentheses are those of the informants).

Again, we do not have as many instances as we would like; still, the evidence seems fairly clear that this rule is variable for these speakers. Note in particular that items (15) and (16) were produced by the same speaker, though opposite in construction.

It has been pointed out to me by Dan Flebotte that item (16) differs from the indirect questions studied by Labov in that it is in the negative and contains no imperative force (though otherwise, it would seem, derived from the same basic underlying structures). In my data, in negative (non-imperative) constructions, the noninverted ("Standard") construction--far from being nonexistent--overwhelmingly predominates. See, for example, (18)-(20):

(18). I don't know whether you know what that is or not (C.F.)

(19). I don't know what he do now (L.W.)

(20). I don't know what they will do with Nixon, at all.

Of the 21 examples of this construction in my data, only one example is of the inverted variety:[5]

(21). And I don't know is it the twenty-second floor or what floor it was (L.W.)

It is interesting to note, furthermore, that in every case in which a question word was not present in the embedded clause, <u>whether</u>, not <u>if</u>, was chosen--

nine times in my data. This of course is surprising, for Labov's findings would lend us to expect *if* to predominate.

Thus we conclude for this variety of Black English (a). that *if/whether* and other non-inverted indirect questions are present by variable rule in the productive competence of at least the majority of such speakers, and (b). that the Standard form is preferred overwhelmingly in negative constructions. How can we reconcile these facts with Labov's findings? Even though Labov's study did not include negative constructions, the presence *in* them of *if/whether* in the speech of my informants certainly suggests that some modification of his rule is in order.

With respect to non-negatives, several possibilities suggest themselves. Least likely, I think, is that my ladies have "corrected" their speech on the model of the whites for whom they worked for so many years--that is, that their speech is closer to Standard than that of the adolescent street gang members studied by Labov. If this is so, however, it is surprising that it is the only feature that I have found in which my informants have done so; the rest of the data shows highly deviant forms, many of which are heavily-stigmatized, "high-visibility" items such as emphatic *done*, the travelling agreement morpheme (*I gets off* work at seven), etc. Differences in purely geographical dialects likewise seems an improbable explanation, given the recentness of the urban migration of blacks.

Two more likely suggestions come to mind: hypercorrection, and age-grading. According to Fasold and Wolfram (1970), the inverted forms arose in Black English from creole dialects, in which it is the case that both direct and indirect questions are uninverted; at some point, the creole speakers began to notice "that the standard dialect had inverted direct questions," and so "generalized to both types."[6] That is, Creole *Ask him if he want it; He want it*? became post-Creole I *Ask him if he want it, Do he want it*?, and, by hypercorrection, post-Creole II, *Ask him do he want it, Do he want it*?

In other words, the creoles--and my ladies--are closer to Standard English with respect to indirect questions than Labov's urban adolescents--though of course farther from Standard English in terms of the post-creole continuum!

In my earlier paper I was sceptical of this view, on the grounds that it seems surprising that "hypercorrection" should be converted to an invariant rule so strong that it would inhibit reproduction on a repetition test. Moreover, the presence of the non-standard feature in the speech of "Standard" speakers, and the suggested British historical origins, complicates whatever one might say about the post-creole continuum. Furthermore, the presence of the if/whether forms in the negative sentences argues against Fasold-Wolfram: why should the presence of negation "preserve" the "archaic" form? Most important of all, it seems odd that hypercorrection would take place after a "correct" stage had been achieved!

It seems much more likely, then, that variation has been present in these constructions among black Americans all along. The only question remaining is why did Labov's adolescent males have such difficulties with the repetition tests. I suggest age-grading. It should be recalled that only half of Labov's speakers had difficulty with the repetition test; the other half did not. Perhaps, then, the most likely answer is that, in a community in which the variable rule is far from categorical for either possibility--in which Ask John did the mail come yet and Ask John if the mail came yet are heard very frequently among mature speakers--some adolescent speakers have learned the subtleties involved, while other have not.

But whatever the historical explanation, one thing is clear: indirect question formation is a variable rule in most varieties of spoken English, black and white.

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[2]"Variability in Indirect Questions." For additional important evidence, see also Juanita V. Williamson, "On the Embedded Question," in Lexicography and Dialect Geography: Festgabe for Hans Kurath, ed. Harald Scholler and John Reidy (Zeitschrift für Dialektologie und Linguistik, Beihefte, N. F., Nr.9; Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1973), 260-267. Though the two points of view are essentially the same, Williamson does not attempt the historical connection with British regional English, nor does she interpret the data within the framework of variation theory.

[3]The "dialects" to which Gordon and Lakoff refer are not further defined, either socially or geographically--an omission unfortunately characteristic of much current work on linguistics.

[4]William Labov, Language in the Inner City (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 62.

[5]This appears to be reminiscent of Gordon and Lakoff's suggestion that only the noninverted form (e.g. 6 above) can mean "statement"--though, as we have seen, the situation is far more complicated than they describe it.

Example (21), by the way, is no fluke. Though it is the only example of the inverted form after I don't know in my data, I have heard it from other speakers, e.g., five minutes before this talk was given, a waitress (black, in her early 20's) in Atlanta was overheard saying to a co-worker, I don't know should I give it to you or not.

[6]Ralph W. Fasold and Walter A. Wolfram, "Some Linguistic Features of Negro Dialect," in Teaching Black Children to Read, ed. Ralph W. Fasold and Roger W. Shuy (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970), p. 80.